

As focus shifts to Covid pills, Indian companies eye affordable antiviral medicine

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MUMBAI: With the focus shifting to treatment of Covid-19 through oral pills, domestic companies including Cipla, Dr Reddy's, Sun Pharma and BDR Pharma are eyeing antivirals including Pfizer's new drug, Paxlovid. Importantly, most of these antivirals are expected to be manufactured in the country and will be available at a fraction of the global price. These new drugs are expected to be a huge market, with Coronavirus headed to the endemic stage in certain countries, and could be a potential game changer for mild to moderate infections.

Recently, Pfizer announced positive results of its COVID-19 oral antiviral candidate, Paxlovid, which significantly reduced hospitalization and death, and plans to submit the data for Emergency Use Authorization in the US soon. "Pfizer is looking to deliver safe and effective oral anti-viral

therapeutic(s) as soon as possible and at an affordable price, subject to regulatory authorization, across the globe", a company official told TOI.

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Count Drops Below 1.3 Lakh; Kerala Leads Small Dip In Fresh Cases

Worst five states in Covid cases

Name of State/UT	New cases confirmed on Tuesday	Deaths on Tuesday	India	
			Cases	Deaths
Kerala	5,516	39	Tuesday 10,321	127
Maharashtra	886	34	Monday 8,433	128
Bengal	819	14	Last Tuesday 11,679	120
Tamil Nadu	789	15		
Mizoram	611	1		
Others	1,700	24		



Further, on Tuesday, the US-based firm tied up with the UN-backed Medicines Patent Pool to license the COVID drug in 95 countries, including India. The MPP has invited expression of interest from generic companies globally, and will soon sublicense the manufacture and sale of Paxlovid, a combination of an experimental pill (PF-07321332) and an HIV drug, ritonavir. When contacted, Cipla said Pfizer's antiviral is of interest to the company, while Dr Reddy's said it remains open to all opportunities.

A Sun Pharma spokesperson said "it is our ongoing endeavour to accelerate access to new drugs for Covid-19 treatment in India and all the markets we serve globally and we are open to all options".

These companies are also amongst those that have tied up with Merck for its antiviral pill, which is expected to be launched at an economical price after the regulatory nod here. Given the intense competition, industry experts expect it to be around Rs 1200-1500 for the five-day course.

A similar trend would be visible in Pfizer's pill once raw material supply for the antiviral is spruced up in India, and it could be priced under \$40 (~Rs 3000) per course, experts added.

Pfizer has not disclosed a price for this treatment but said it could be priced similar to Merck's pricing for the COVID-19 treatment molnupiravir, at around \$700 per treatment course in high-income countries. For low- and middle-income countries, it is expected to apply a 'tiered pricing' strategy based on the income level of each country.

“At present there are no patent barriers for the drug in India. Generic companies have the freedom to operate and manufacture Covid-19 therapies against the backdrop of the TRIPS waiver sought by the Indian government. In instances, where there are patents, there is less likelihood of them being enforced in the country”, Leena Menghaney, global IP advisor of MSF Access Campaign, told TOI.

Many upper middle-income countries, such as Argentina, Brazil, China, Malaysia and Thailand, where established generic production capacity exists, are excluded from the license territory in the Pfizer-MPP agreement. Licensing deals by pharmaceutical corporations that create uncertainties and segmentation for generic production and supply continue to be part of the problem rather than part of a real solution, health experts say.

At present, manufacturing facilities for Pfizer's antiviral PF-07321332 include Ireland, Germany and Italy.